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ABSTRACT

For much of this century, text linguists have recognized that various tokens called "metadiscourse" may help explain how texts function. In linguistics, metadiscourse has a more concrete meaning than it typically does in composition: it refers to specific words, phrases, and clauses which are primarily intended to help the reader understand the text, rather than to further the propositional content. Some metadiscourse features--often called text markers--simply add a degree of redundancy to help readers manage the information. Other features guide the audience through the reading process and indicate the author's opinions. Because metadiscourse affects the readability of a text, researchers such as William Vande Kopple complain that metadiscourse is not being satisfactorily addressed in the writing classroom. This may be partially because textbook authors may choose to avoid it. But metadiscourse instruction is important. First students need to see that how they use metadiscourse will affect how they are perceived by their audience. Second, students need to learn to look for the metadiscourse in their texts to discover places where global revisions are needed. The instructor's goal should be to take the metadiscourse theory developed by linguists and refine it so that students can be helped to write more effectively. (Contains 13 references.) (CR)

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Building Bridges: Linguistics, Composition, and Ethos

Paper Presented at the 1996
Conference on College Composition and Communication
by
Debra S. Knutson

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For much of this century, text linguists have recognized that the various tokens they call *metadiscourse* may help explain how texts function. But few researchers concerned themselves with making metadiscourse theory accessible to the general population until 1985, when William J. Vande Kopple outlined the importance of teaching composition students "wise uses" of metadiscourse.

In linguistics, metadiscourse has a more concrete meaning than it typically does in composition. Luming R. Mao sums up the broad definition of *metadiscourse* typically used in composition by explaining that this *metadiscourse* refers "to any kind of critical interpretation or theoretical exposition of a given (or 'target') discourse or theory" (265). But in linguistics, *metadiscourse* usually refers to specific words, phrases, and clauses which are primarily intended to help the reader understand the text, rather than to further propositional content. It is this concrete use of *metadiscourse* which is discussed in this paper.

The easiest way I have found to help people—particularly those outside of English Studies—gain a general understanding of metadiscourse is to ask them to think back to all of those really horrible, meaningless papers they had to write in high school, the papers that had to include a thesis statement with the words: "In this paper, I will do three things. . . ." When I see them shiver (a sure sign that they are reliving an early uncomfortable writing experience), I tell them that once they started discussing those three things, they

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were starting to give the readers propositional content—but everything in the sentence up until that point was metadiscourse.

I'm reasonably happy with this description of metadiscourse as a starting point. The problem, of course, is that no one ever wants me to go on. While I can't say I blame them, I'm very concerned that I'm propagating the misconception that metadiscourse is bad. Metadiscourse is frequently used badly. And when it is, it tends to draw attention to itself. Thus, bad uses of metadiscourse may be the easiest for us to recognize. But metadiscourse is a necessary element in writing, and even the most gifted writers use it.

Some metadiscourse features—often called *textual markers*—simply add a degree of redundancy that helps readers manage the information provided in the text. For example, text connectives like "secondly" and "in addition" guide readers through the text and show them how the old information relates to new material.

Other metadiscourse features not only guide the audience through the reading process, but also indicate what sort of opinions the author has on the topic. Such features include hedges (*perhaps, probably*) and attitude markers (*I agree that*, the use of exclamation points). When authors use this *interpersonal metadiscourse*, they typically hope that their own opinions will, in turn, influence their readers' opinions.

Because metadiscourse affects the readability of a text, many researchers, beginning with Vande Kopple, have complained that metadiscourse is not satisfactorily addressed in the writing classroom. Vande Kopple laments the failings of composition textbooks, stating that he believes these textbooks should provide "unified and comprehensive sections on wise uses" of metadiscourse (87). And during the past

decade, numerous text linguists have repeated Vande Kopple's complaint: composition textbooks do not adequately address metadiscourse.

However, composition specialists have tended to react negatively to such judgments. Mao, for example, urges colleagues to "resist the temptation to . . . move toward constructing a pragmatic account of metadiscourse" (284). How is it that members of the same academic community have converse attitudes about metadiscourse instruction? Why do the members of two subdisciplines of English Studies typically have opposing viewpoints in this area?

The reasons may be many. First, there is the practical reason. Textbook authors may choose to avoid discussion of metadiscourse simply because the topic does not fall in their area of expertise. Rhetorics and handbooks are typically written by composition specialists rather than by linguists. Composition specialists typically have a sound background in traditional rhetoric, but they have not necessarily studied the relatively new field of text linguistics, and therefore may not know enough about the various types of metadiscourse to teach them adequately. Indeed, metadiscourse researchers probably become more concerned when metadiscourse instruction is inappropriate or misleading than when it is nonexistent. Avon Crismore, Raija Markkanen and Margaret S. Steffensen, for example, have charged that certain textbook writers who have attempted to discuss aspects of metadiscourse have actually presented students with "caveats or myths" (3).

A second reason metadiscourse may not typically be addressed in composition textbooks is that even those composition specialists who are familiar with the linguistic

study of metadiscourse may not agree that there is a need to teach it. Scholars who, like many good writers, have developed an understanding of how to use metadiscourse effectively without direct instruction might expect student writers to develop this skill naturally. For such writers, explaining how to use metadiscourse when you write may seem as ludicrous as trying to explain how to bleed when you are cut.

Likewise, some authors may intentionally omit discussion of metadiscourse—even though they realize that their readers have difficulty using such cues—because they believe the topic is beyond the reach of their audience. Authors of textbooks designed for basic writers, for example, may omit discussion of metadiscourse because their intended audience needs fundamental instruction and is not yet prepared to study the subtle aspects of language.

It should be noted that while metadiscourse was becoming a popular topic among linguists, composition specialists were learning how to emphasize process rather than product in their classrooms. Adding, deleting, or refining metadiscourse requires local revision, not the global changes instructors of basic classes often emphasize.

But while all of these reasons probably have some impact on why metadiscourse is not more thoroughly addressed in composition texts or classrooms, I do not believe that metadiscourse instruction will even truly be embraced by composition instructors until it is shown that metadiscourse theory (1) can be accessible to writing students, and (2) can be taught using methods that are appropriate to the process-centered writing class.

As metadiscourse theory has been refined, it has become increasingly rigid. In 1985, Vande Kopple suggested seven categories of metadiscourse: four categories of

textual metadiscourse and three categories of interpersonal metadiscourse. His categories follow:

1. Text connectives (Words like *but* and *next* help readers understand how texts are organized.)
2. Code glosses
3. Illocution markers (Cues like *for example* show readers what the significance of a particular speech act is.)
4. Narrators (Phrases like *according to Jones* tell readers who stated something.)
5. Validity markers (*Hedges* like *I think*, *emphatics* like *certainly*, and *attributors* like *according to Einstein* all help readers judge the accuracy of a given portion of text.)
6. Attitude markers (These cues—like *surprisingly*—let writers know how the author responds to a portion of the text.)
7. Commentaries (These phrases, like Charlotte Brontë's *dear reader*, are used to make the reader feel like s/he is having a type of dialogue with the writer.)

Vande Kopple took many of these categories from works of earlier researchers like Joseph M. Williams and Liisa Lautamatti. He explained that the categories were not exclusive, and that subsequent researchers would probably find ways to improve his taxonomy.

Indeed, a number of researchers have since worked with metadiscourse categories. Some, like Paul Beauvais, have completely replaced Vande Kopple's categories with new systems. Others have simply tinkered with Vande Kopple's system, as we can see by the chart Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen include in their article:

I. TEXTUAL METADISCOURSE (used for logical and ethical appeals)
   1. Textual Markers
      - ⇒ Logical Connectives
      - ⇒ Sequencers
      - ⇒ Reminders
      - ⇒ Topicalizers
   2. Interpretive Markers
      - ⇒ Code Glosses
      - ⇒ Illocution Markers

⇒ Announcements

II. INTERPERSONAL METADISCOURSE (used for emotional and ethical appeals)

3. Hedges (epistemic certainty markers)
4. Certainty Markers (epistemic emphatics)
5. Attributors
6. Attitude Markers
7. Commentary (47)

Such categories can be a boon to researchers who are struggling to figure out exactly how metadiscourse works in texts in general or in a particular text. But they don't suggest organic methods of teaching metadiscourse. Quite the contrary: the only teaching application they seem to suggest would be a set of workbook drills.

I contend that metadiscourse instruction is important. But teaching students to recognize these metadiscourse categories will not help them use metadiscourse appropriately. Instead, I believe we need to focus on two main issues.

First, we need to help students see that how they use metadiscourse will affect how they are perceived by their audience. A student needs to learn how metadiscourse is used in a particular discourse community if s/he is to develop an ethos appropriate to that particular discourse community. It is simply impossible to prescribe good-but-general advice on how to use metadiscourse in all situations.

A particular reminder, for example, might be appropriate in one discourse community, but not in another. In our field, a writer can say, "as I noted in the previous chapter," but in certain technical fields, where the use of the first person pronoun is considered vulgar, a writer might have to say, "the previous chapter noted. . . ." Thus, instead of simply learning to recognize different types of metadiscourse, students need to

learn to be very judicious about semantics when they realize a particular type of metadiscourse marker is needed.

Second, we need to teach students to look for the metadiscourse in their texts because looking at the metadiscourse may help them discover places where global revisions are needed. Often, the texts with the most offensive uses of metadiscourse are bad not so much because the author doesn't know how to use metadiscourse, but rather because the author is trying to use metadiscourse to cover up a text which is poorly constructed in other ways. I'd like to share two examples of this problem.

The first is from an early episode of *M*A*S*H*, where Trapper and Hawkeye are trying to diffuse a bomb, while Henry, at a distance, gives them instructions over a megaphone. After Hawkeye and Trapper follow Henry's directive to cut certain wires, Henry continues to the next sentence in the instructions, which begins: "But first . . . ." The logical connective and the sequencer in this text make it understandable. The real problem with the text is not metadiscourse, but organization. The metadiscourse actually allowed the characters to see that they had made a mistake. (And, upon realizing their mistake, they dove for cover. Fortunately, the device turned out to be a propaganda bomb, so tragedy was averted anyway.)

The second example is from the Hotel Wisconsin. On the interior of the guest room doors, the management has posted a series of instructions for how to behave in an emergency situation:

HOTEL WISCONSIN

FOR YOUR SAFETY IN AN EMERGENCY . . . IF YOU DETECT FIRE OR SMOKE, CALL THE OPERATOR. FEEL THE DOOR TO SEE IF IT IS HOT. IF NOT, OPEN DOOR SLIGHTLY TO SEE IF YOU CAN MAKE IT TO THE STAIRWAY OR FIRE ESCAPE (SEE SKETCH FOR CLOSEST EXIT)[.] IF SMOKE IS HEAVY, SEAL DOOR WITH WET TOWELS, OPEN AND STAY NEAR WINDOWS UNTIL HELP ARRIVES. CLOSE WINDOW IF SMOKE STARTS TO COME THROUGH OPEN WINDOW. DO NOT PANIC. DO NOT USE ELEVATORS. USE STAIRWAY OR FIRE ESCAPES TO LEAVE BUILDING.

If the authors of this text had organized the items in the most effective sequence, "Do not panic" would probably be the first item. Instead, the writers decided to underscore that sentence. Since anyone reading this sign during a real emergency would probably have panicked long before reading the instruction not to, this interpersonal metadiscourse marker (the underscoring) is not likely to compensate for the poor organization of the text.

In both of these examples, the authors of the texts come across not as reputable authorities, but as dolts. And both texts probably propagate the misconception that metadiscourse is bad, when in fact, organization is a greater problem

Clearly, metadiscourse, carefully used, can help a writer establish an ethos appropriate to a particular discourse community. And metadiscourse, inappropriately

used, can detract from the writer's ethos. Our goal, then, should be to take the metadiscourse theory developed by linguists and refine it so that we can better help our students to write more effectively.

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